

# Landscape Confection: The Loneliness of the Decorative

Helen Molesworth

*To fill a Gap  
Insert the Thing that caused it—  
Block it up  
With Other—and 'twill yawn the more—  
You cannot solder an Abyss  
With Air.*

Emily Dickinson c. 1862

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Feminist artists had a vested interest in recovering the realm of the decorative from modernism's trash heap, and feminist art took up the possibility of the decorative in a dual fashion, similar to the split oeuvre of Watteau. Pattern and Decoration artists celebrated its histories and possibilities, and saw in it a joyous positivity. For others, such as Judy Chicago or Faith Wilding, the decorative was more ambivalent, filled with solitariness, sexuality, and melancholy. Rowena Dring's works embody both of these tendencies. Large canvases composed entirely of appliqué work, they are truly quilts turned into paintings, paintings turned into quilts. Deft in their exploration of the shifts of light and color in the natural environment, Dring's landscapes are also starkly empty and have a pronounced aura of the mechanical. The skill of the sewing and the production of the effects of light are countermanded by the paint-by-number quality of the compositions. Drawing connections between the hobby of Sunday painters and hundreds of years of women's needlework, Dring revels in the pleasures of the decorative while acknowledging the solitary quality of such pursuits and intimating that such activities are a way of staving off the existential condition of loneliness.

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## Rowena Dring

Born 1970, Wellingborough, Northamptonshire, England.  
Lives and works in London.

Influenced as much by the folk-art techniques of quilting, appliqué, and embroidery, amateur travel photography, and kitschy 1970s' photographic wallpaper as she is by op, pop, and Pattern and Decoration painting, Rowena Dring uses stitched fabric to make paintings that collapse distinctions between high art and handicraft, abstraction and representation. In Dring's landscapes, cozily situated beach cottages, rippling waterfalls, fiery-hued foliage at the height of its autumnal glory, and dappled light dancing across the water's surface are all constructed from flat segments of solid color, sewn together with black thread and stretched across a canvas frame. The color-blocked appearance of these compositions recalls the look of comic strips, maps, and old magazine illustrations, as well as the "Everyone can be a Rembrandt" naiveté of early paint-by-number kits and the Sunday painters who purchased them.

Nature's own intricate patternings provide the jumping-off point for Dring's nimble needlework. What at first may seem like a studied genericism in her choice of subject matter belies the difficulties involved in capturing the reflective qualities of water and light. Because she is constructing complex images by suturing differently colored swatches of fabric rather than blending paint, Dring must become something of an illusionist, creating depth, shadow, plays of light, and gradations of form by interspersing colors in intricate patterns. Depending on where one stands, Dring's pictures appear either to break apart into hundreds of fragments or coalesce into recognizable nature scenes. Over time her works have increased in scale, which only enhances these optical effects. *Tree* (2002) and *Untitled (Water)* (2002) measure

approximately 6½ x 4 feet and 2½ x 5 feet, respectively. Like picture windows, they invite viewing from multiple positions and proximities, with different experiences to be had each time. What might otherwise be banal nature scenes are made spectacular through the sheer manual dexterity required to make them legible on such a large scale.

When studied closely, Dring's paintings enact subtle dramas about the problematic nature of visual representation. Her subjects must submit to several levels of visual translation: She starts by identifying a locale, either a place captured in a magazine travel photo or snapped by the artist herself during nature walks. The photographic image provides the setting the painting is based on. The translation from photographic image to quilted composition, however, demands an approach that is at once carefully orchestrated and far more intuitive. Breaking the composition apart into hundreds of fragments, Dring assigns each a color and then fits the broken pieces back together again like a jigsaw puzzle. The resulting paintings resemble exploded still lifes, freezing a moment in time in such a way that the actions, and interactions, of surfaces and planes, solid matter and its dispersal, and reflected light become singularly apparent. Each black-bordered segment seems to vibrate fully on its own yet is also part of a macrocosm of simultaneous movements, forces, and events. In the end, Dring brings us full circle by managing to make "wild nature" something truly wild again. Her paintings enact the willful resistance of the "natural order" to the cultural frames and vistas we inevitably want to construct around it.